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AMBASSADORS OF FRANCE

By FRANK R. ARNOLD

A MORMON missionary who had been spending three years in Holland as president of the Dutch mission told me on his return that his main object during his mission had been to show to the Dutch that he was a fairly decent specimen of an adherent to the faith of the Latter Day Saints. He wanted to convince them that he had no horns, that he was not a Don Juan with a religious bee in his bonnet, that he was possessed of a certain degree of intelligence and culture, that he was a human being with eyes, nose, organs and dimensions like unto those of the Batavians. In short he was to be an ambassador of Utah to the Dutch, a revealer of self rather than a torchbearer to those sitting in darkness. Before he could persuade the natives of Rotterdam and all the other dams to exchange new theological lamps for old he knew that there were many prejudices to be removed, and being a very human Utahn he placed his ambassadorial qualities fully as high in importance as his priestly teachings.

In like manner every teacher of French in the United States is an ambassador of France, clearing away prejudices, inspiring international sympathy and waving a much needed Latin torch. And the need is great. We all know how vastly superior before the War were the German departments of all our colleges and universities to the Romance. And the high schools paved the way for this superiority because only in the high schools of New England was French highly esteemed. In the middle west it was completely thrust aside by German, and in California and the southwest by Spanish. The war was not such a great internationalizing influence as was predicted. To be sure Will Irwin says, "France finally gets you," but he qualifies it with the remark that it "gets you" only so much as you become acquainted with it. One American regiment spent about six months in training near Bordeaux and was sent home soon after the signing of the armistice. During this time the men were allowed to go into Bordeaux only twice and so when they returned to America all the French people they had

seen were pedlars and scarlet women, both of them superior to the American article, but still hardly the most likable elements in French society. A sister of one of the men in the regiment made a most revealing comment on reading Dorothy Canfield's "Home Fires in France." She read first the story of the Frenchman who manufactured a superior cold cream and was not willing to enlarge his business with American capital for fear that the personal element would be found lacking in his product if it were produced on a large scale. It brings out admirably the strength and weakness of both French and American business methods, but what most impressed the girl was the beautiful picture of French family life when the French manufacturer sits in the garden with his wife and daughters in the cool of the day and talks over the American offer. Unconsciously the girl applied the French proverb that understanding all makes one forgive all and before she had finished the story she exploded with the remark, "Why, this is the first decent thing I have ever heard about French people." Anyone who has ever taken a party of tourists abroad for the summer knows what a mass of prejudice he has to fight against if he is to be a guide, philosopher and friend as well as a business manager. His daily and almost hourly wonder is why his charges got so little training in world appreciation and breadth of view out of their high school or college preparation for their trip. "God has given them brains and money," he muses in wonder to himself, "Why did He not also infuse into their very beings the cosmopolitan milk of human kindness?" Mr. Maynard Keynes in a certain famous chapter finds that even Mr. Wilson was totally unprepared to cope with the foreign mind, whether Welch or French. If it takes most of us years to understand the intricacies of character of the members of our own family or community, it seems a gigantic task to try to understand a whole nation, and that a foreign one, but this is a part of the duty of every French teacher, and when you think how few linguists, creative literary artists, or travellers, America produces, perhaps the sociological and political side of France, France as a cosmopolitan element, should stand first in high school or college courses in French.

The very first day of giving instruction the French teacher enters on his ambassadorial duties. The first lesson stands for much parrot-like pronunciation and for the realization that words are

but symbols of ideas, that what is a map or a flag in English speaking circles is *une carte* or *un drapeau* for men who have been rocked in a French cradle or who attend the French class. But with all this drilling of the mind and *capering* of the body there can also be inserted the first of a series of proverbs which are the crystallized essence of the French genius for social conduct as far as contact with their fellow men is concerned. *Noblesse oblige* is good for a starter. It is simplicity itself as regards pronunciation and many of the new students have already met it in their reading. They have all encountered the principle in life if they have any elementary ideas about a Puritan conscience or if they have any boy-scout affiliations. And they are all interested in hearing how this motto of the French nobility is still alive, even in money making days, and that the French expression of the idea has been found the best, because the most concise as well as the most packed with meaning, and hence has been adopted by the entire civilized world. The nobility of being a Frenchman makes him want to have his meals served in courses, his cities equipped with art museums, theatres and gardens, his women dressed with distinction, just as it makes him want to keep the Germans on the right side of the Rhine. The fact that the nobility of being an eighth grade graduate should make a high school student in French ashamed of having forgotten his English grammar, is a good point to enforce at the same time. I have never known French students to fail to catch some bit of the many sided spirit of *noblesse oblige* and the earlier it comes to them the more respect they have for France. It is also an excellent help in upbuilding their own character, for in these so called practical days when high school students may drop any subject at any time, many find French too hard after a few lessons. If you can say to a student that because of the principle, *noblesse oblige*, a man who puts his hand to the plough should keep it there, at least until he reaches the end of the furrow, you have some hold on his self-respect.

Another proverb that the students learn to admire, though at first a mistaken idea of patriotism makes them inclined to fight it, is the well known saying about every man having two fatherlands, his own and France. That has to be explained. You have to tell them they can't open their mouths without using a word from Rome or from Berlin and that those from Rome have come to us

through France and are the more elegant. France begins to look like a fatherland then, and becomes a real one when they find out that a Frenchman, Montesquieu, supplied the main ideas for Jefferson when he wrote the Declaration of Independence, that thanks to Pasteur no American soldier died of typhoid during the war, that thanks to Rousseau all knowledge is being made a pleasure for them, and that they never have to learn anything they don't understand. Frenchmen with pragmatic values for American students are abundant and you merely have to recite names such as Dumas, Binet, Lavoisier, Pathé, Gounod, Taine, and Foch, and a little explanation will show how they count on both sides of the Atlantic. To a teacher who loves his France and his class it is pure joy to pass on such aphorisms as *Le style c'est l'homme*, *Cherchez la femme*, and *Cueillez votre jeunesse*.

No French class is complete now-a-days without its French club. There, for the first time, the student becomes a Frenchman. There he talks not about the pencil and window but about things that interest him. Suppose he starts in with the game of Impertinent Questions; each member of the club has to ask and answer questions that spring spontaneously from a game that calls for good-natured fun. With the talking begins to come the new character, the new point of view, that clothe a man when he really begins to talk a new language. *Esprit* may come even to the dullest grammatical scholar. The program resources of the French club are endless and may be packed with French atmosphere. Sometimes we each personify a river, city, book, or famous citizen of France and the others guess who we are. One student of twenty once explained herself as follows: "*Je suis une actrice célèbre dans tout le monde. J'ai plus de soixante-dix ans. J'ai une jambe de bois mais je marche toujours. Ma devise est "quand même." Devinez qui je suis.*" Of course everyone guessed Sarah Bernhardt from the wooden leg or from the actress' motto which had been current in the class room for many days. At our meeting just before Christmas we always have a Christmas tree hung with humble gifts bought at Woolworths. We sing the Petit Noël from Lécocq's *opéra comique* and certain students act out the "Voyage de Marie et Joseph à Bethléem," that Yvette Guilbert has resurrected from the twelfth century and made immortal for all who have heard her sing the dramatic lines. That is a program from the

very heart of France. The gifts are given out in the French manner. That is, a few cards are laid on a table. On each card is put a gift from the tree. Another pack of cards is dealt out to the club members and those who hold cards corresponding to those on which the gifts lie get the gifts and these are carried to them by a student with a long white beard who personifies Saint Nicholas. That club meeting may also be the students' first approach to French mediaeval drama and to Yvette Guilbert and through the latter's "How to Sing a Song," which should be every French teacher's *Vade mecum*, he should get a continual inspiration to clear French diction and spirited action of even the simplest movements in the French class. More than any other book it is an ambassadorial link between France and the English speaking peoples. The innate love of dramatic material and of clear speaking, as well as the desire to "get the idea over" that characterize France, pervade the whole book and all these qualities are developed by one of the greatest interpretative artists that France has ever sent to America.

You do not have to wait for club meetings to make France live in America. Dull days in the French class can be made to live by a sudden change of base. The mastery of French comes only by eternal drudgery but it may be glorified en route. Suppose a new member is just being received into the French Academy, Henri Bordeaux, for example. How simple to have each member of the French class represent some one of the forty immortals and another Henri Bordeaux. The teacher can *souffler* to Henri two or three well chosen sentences about Lemaître, and to another immortal a few welcoming words for Bordeaux, and the French academy will live forever after in the minds of the students who have personified such men as Joffre, Donnay, Barrès, Poincaré, Hanotaux, or Lavissee, and with the fun of personification may perhaps linger the value of an Academy that fixes national unity in language and literary standards, and the realization that these standards must be agreed upon by distinguished men from many walks of life. What Edith Wharton calls the safe-guarding of *les choses de l'esprit* is a French trait that any French ambassador must champion whether he does it at Washington or in the class-room. Another memorable day in the French club or class room should be about May first when to celebrate the opening of the salon the class holds a *Jour de Vernissage*. Then each student brings a picture to the

class, preferably cut from *L'Illustration* or some French source, pins it on the wall, pretends he is Henri Martin, Lucien Jonas, Amand Jean, Georges Scott or some other famous French painter and describes the subject of his painting to his admiring or critical friends, selected from the class, who gather in a group around him. All this sounds easy to do but it takes a teacher-ambassador who knows France and who is skilled in the art of preface to make the class exercise move with the requisite French lightness of touch and not become a dragging bore, inasmuch as the French class more than any other must be animated by the dictum of Voltaire that everything save ennui is allowable, or as it has been more concisely stated, "Everything goes but bores." The double meaning of "goes" is delicious.

Even when you have a Frenchman lecturing to your club you cannot lie back on your oars. You may have a more genuine ambassador than you are on the stage but you are still enough of an attaché to have to pave the way like John the Baptist or ram the lesson home like Paul. Once our French club was doubly blest. We had arranged for a visit and talk by a young French girl whose home was in Châlons and at the same time a French portrait painter who had wandered into our valley came to hear the girl from Châlons and was also persuaded to say a "few words" and those few were eloquent in praise of the Lombardy poplars in which the valley abounded and which everyone was cutting down and replacing by Norway maples. It was only a question of taste but it led next day to a class discussion as to why a question of taste should be such a vital matter to a Frenchman and new windows were opened on how things are done decently and in order in France. The young woman was a distinctly blond Frankish type, while the painter was an equally strong Latin type and we enjoyed using our Taine faculties in showing how the two talks could be traced back to the Rhine and Rome that gave them their respective features, and how both had a Celtic element that was neither Teuton nor Latin. Possibly a bit far-fetched, but it was passing on the analytical torch that has illumined the work of many a French critic and is no mean acquisition for an American to hold.

The more a French teacher thinks it over the more he must realize that he is the ambassador-interpreter. He must be satu-

rated with France. It must ooze right out of him. Like Bozaris he should drip at every vein. France has done much for him and he should rejoice at the opportunity to pass it on. France is his kingdom and he is the high priest. Every book he reads with the class should be a window with a view on some corner of that pleasant land. George Sand's window looks on rural France; Pierre Loti's on Brittany; Labiche's on the *petite bourgeoisie*; Maupassant's on the significant human gesture; Anatole France's on that amiable satire which is granted only to the elect to originate but which many may enjoy. Even scientific French, usually regarded merely as a tool, may become an intimate association with the finest minds in France. It is all so pervaded with what Pasteur called when he talked to the students of Edinburgh, "*le culte des grands hommes et des grandes choses*;" the worship, adoration of great men and great things, that is France in a nutshell and should be the finest by-product, if not the *raison d'être* of the French class. Even the vocabulary of scientific French may be acquired through a literary medium. All the vocabulary of bacteriology and infinitely more may be obtained by reading Sacha Guitry's play based on episodes in the life of Pasteur. There is always a chance that genius may be contagious and the rising generation cannot be exposed too much to it.

It is in this lack of exposure to genius that modern education is a sinner. We work for the mob and not for the choice spirits who are to be the leaders of tomorrow. We wish to develop skill in all, put the trade school ideal into all types of education and it is this ideal that Americans need least of all. Even church schools and colleges, in order to compete with state institutions, are multiplying the easy and the so-called practical courses. French in eastern high schools and colleges has always been considered as a snap course. "Reading some old novel," one student contemptuously called it. In some western colleges it is considered as hard and useless as Greek. The only thing that can save it is the human element. And the greater the ambassador in the professorial chair, the keener will be the interest in the new country, provided the students have some small background of ears to hear and eyes to see.

Carlyle had the true ambassadorial spirit when he wrote to Emerson as follows:

"And so here, looking over the water, let me repeat once more what I believe is already dimly the sentiment of all Englishmen, Cisoceanic and Transoceanic, that we and you are *not* two countries, and cannot for the life of us be; but only two *parishes* of one country, with such wholesome parish hospitalities, and dirty temporary parish feuds, as we see; both of which brave parishes *Vivant! vivant!* And among the glories of *both* be Yankee-doodle-doo, and the Felling of the Western Forest, proudly remembered; and for the rest, by way of parish constable, let each cheerfully take such George Washington or George Guelph as it can get, and bless Heaven! I am weary of hearing it said, 'We love the Americans,' 'We wish well,' etc., etc. What in God's name should we do else?"

When the French teacher has brought even one student to a similar point of view with regard to France and America he has been a true ambassador. He is worthy of academic palms.

Agricultural College, Logan, Utah